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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the methodological problems facing researchers interested in studying black communication, some of which are the same problems encountered by students of intercultural communication. While the study of black communication must deal with the usual problems of obtaining primary resources, establishing the appropriate methodologies, developing a community of scholars, and developing methods of disseminating information, the development of the area of black communication is also hampered to a large degree by its intercultural dimension. Specifically, a reference to "black" communication calls attention to the fact that a distinct cultural group exists and that this group's communication is substantially different from that of others. The author concludes that the researcher is faced with the problems of (1) defining black in a way that is consistent with an attitude of mind rather than a designation of race, (2) understanding that blacks are not simply a neglected population that is either devoid of culture or an incomplete form of the "dominant" culture, and (3) developing research methodologies that are based upon primary assumptions that are the same as those supporting black communication. (LG)

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# BLACK COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: A PROBLEM IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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In terms of being an area of study that was neglected in the past and an area of study that is now finding its way into speech communication curricula, the students of Black communication face many of the same problems that are faced by students of intercultural communication. Problems related to research, training, and teaching abound in both areas of study. While the study of Black communication faces the usual problems of obtaining primary resources, establishing appropriate methodologies, developing a community of scholars, developing methods of disseminating information, etc., the development of the area of Black communication is also to a large degree hampered by its intercultural dimension.

The very act of speaking of Black communication, as opposed to simply speaking of communication implies many of the factors that are commonly thought of when one speaks of intercultural communication. Specifically, a reference to Black communication calls attention to the fact that a distinct cultural group exists, and the fact that the cultural group's communication is substantially differently from non-Blacks. The perceived intercultural dimension of Black communication becomes even more clear when we realize that the call for the study of Black communication came out of a situation in which Blacks and non-Blacks, particularly many of those of the white race, were having serious problems in terms of interacting with each other politically, physically, and symbolically. While the multi-faceted problem of racism in North America, Europe, and Africa is not simply a problem of intercultural communication, certainly some of the problems can be accounted for in these terms.

It is maintained here that one of the many results of racism is that over a period of time the life experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed have become so divergent that communication between them can be thought of as an intercultural communication situation. However, the intercultural dimension of the situation is often missed because of the perceptual bias, dogma, and general ignorance that people have with regard to the oppressed. For example, it is all too often falsely assumed that residence in America and the speaking of English have resolved whatever cultural differences that existed between Blacks and Whites. I believe that if researchers hold false assumptions such as this one, then their attempt to study Black communication will be a problem of intercultural communication. In addition to disspelling false assumptions, we must have a sound theoretical and philosophical framework from which to work if we are to have progress in Black communication research. Many of the problems of conducting research, training, and teaching in Black communication stem from the absence of a sound conceptual framework. In their efforts to rapidly develop the area of Black communication, would be researchers in this area have all too often failed to grasp the full implication of the fact that the very act of studying Black communication has intercultural communication dimensions. One of the basic ways in which this fact is ignored is by researchers desiring to begin with the question of <u>how</u> to conduct research in this area.

I have often been asked, "What kind of studies should we be doing at this time in Black communication? That is, do we need to conduct experimental studies, historical studies, case studies, or what? Should we use a behavioral science approach or should we use a more intuitive approach?" In short, I receive quite a few questions on how to conduct research in this area. I think that this immediate concern with how occurs because for various reasons people want to collect some data in order to have tangible things to discuss and teach about. However, in spite of their reasons, I do not believe that real progress can be made in this area if we begin with the question of how. Moreover, I believe that when it comes to the study of Black communication, it is a cultural bias that leads to the asking of questions concerning how before asking and answering questions about what, who, and why? This cultural bias in part stems from the false assumption that Blacks in America are not culturally different from whites, and any differences that do exist are either failures to become fully assimilated or innate differences on the parts of Blacks that do not permit them to become fully human. This cultural bias also stems from a basic cultural difference in Black communication as opposed to scientific methods of inquiry. Specifically, Black communication is more of a function of what, who, and why as opposed to how. Black communication never has content subservient to form, and the researcher who begins with form is immediately on the trail of intercultural communication difficulties. More will be said about this later. Before

we proceed further with this matter, we must realize that even the what of Black communication is confusing for many.

There are those who talk about Black communication and their meaning of Black is derived from the negative connotations of the color word in English, i.e. dull, bad, evil, illegal, etc. I hope that everyone can easily see how this meaning of Black would simply lead to research into the psychopathology of racists and not provide enlightenment on the communication of Black people. There are others who use the word Black to refer to race.

The use of Black in reference to a particular race puts the researcher on a little safer ground than when the reference is merely to the negative connotations of the color word. However, the use of Black to refer to race can only be used as a sign post since we have not conducted research that demonstrates that the characteristics of race have fundamental effects on the complex behavior of people. Black, used to refer to race, derives its significance as a sign post because of its correlation, which is far from a one to one relationship, with the root causes of behavioral differences across cultures, i.e. the primary assumptions which make up one's attitude of mind. Only when we use Black to refer to a particular attitude of mind can we truly make progress in the area of Black communication. Coming to grips with this Black attitude of mind is also what, for many people, makes the study of Black communication a problem of intercultural communication. Accordingly, understanding the Black attitude of mind,

constitutes one of the primary obstacles to research in Black communication.

An attitude of mind can be equated with the concept of world view if one means by world view how one lives as opposed to one's intellectual understanding of the world, i.e. a view of the world. An attitude of mind is made up of what might be called primary assumptions. Primary assumptions are those first, religious, philosophical points that give birth to a culture. Culture itself can be thought of as that organized pattern of behavior that is the function of an integrated set of primary, religious, philosophical assumptions. We have intercultural communication situations when two or more people come together with different sets of primary assumptions. It is not the differences in symbols that primarily account for intercultural difficulties. The symbols are merely physical barriers which can be overcome with sufficient training. The primary assumptions are psychological barriers which might not have been overcome even when the two or more people are using the same symbols since these primary assumptions are interwoven into our whole process of living. The problem for conducting research in Black communication is to ascertain the primary assumptions that make up the Black attitude of mind. Unless this is done, the behavioral manifestations of Black communication cannot help but be distorted by being evaluated in terms of the primary assumptions of the researcher. As a Jamaican friend of mine stated, in order to conduct research on a given group of people, "you must learn to see as they see and hear as they hear." Potential researchers

in Black communication all too often assume that Blacks see as the researcher sees, and hear as the researcher hears, and thus the only problem in studying Black communication is to decide on area priorities. In order to clarify this point, let us briefly consider how the primary assumptions of the academic stream of thought might be incompatible with the primary assumptions that foster Black communication.

One of the fundamental differences between the academic stream of thought and Black communication might entail one's understanding of cause and effect. By its emphasis on objectivity, quantification, empirical verification, etc., the academic stream of thought might lead one to believe that the world of causation is quite "visible," and therefore, is capable of visible verification. However, one of the primary assumptions of the African world view is that the invisible world constitutes the world of causation and the visible world merely constitutes the world of effects. With this fundamental difference in primary assumptions, an intercultural, methodological question is raised. How does one develop research methodologies that are in keeping with the primary assumption that the invisible subjective world is the world of causation, and the objective, visible empirical world is the world of effect? Perhaps an additional illustration will suffice to point to the intercultural methodological problems for studying Black communication.

As was stated earlier, Black communication does not have content subservient to form. However, so much of what the academic stream of thought is concerned with is form. Consider for example the communication

process in the traditional Afroamerican church. Many scientifically oriented researchers seem to be interested in classifying the various responses that are made by members of the congregation, documenting the rate of responses, etc. However, it is held here that the most important aspect of the communication process in the traditional Afroamerican church is the invisible factor that gives rise to this antiphonal pattern. Thus, it is held that a "Black" understanding of Black religious communication must first come to grips with the rudiments of African religion, mythology, and folklore -- all of which are in contradiction to the underpinnings of the academic stream of thought.

A final illustration is based upon Sidney Willhelm's discussion of scientific objectivity and scientific research. According to Willhelm,

> ..."Objectivity" is perhaps the foremost expression of the scientific spirit; detachment, a non-committal attitude, ranks as the hallmark for scientific inquiry.[1]

We can immediately see the intercultural problem of the scientific attitude of objectivty when one realizes that Black communication is best characterized by the opposites of the adjectives used in describing the scientific method. Black communication is subjective as opposed to objective. Black communication emphasizes personal involvement as opposed to detachment. Black communication involves an attitude of full commitment as opposed to non-commitment. A second quote from

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[1]Sidney Willhelm, "Veliskovsky's Challenge to the Scientific Establishment," Pensee, Volume 3, Number 1, Winter, 1973, p. 32.

Willhelm might further define the problem that is being considered in this paper.

> ...one is expected to be a professional in order to implant objective scholarship, and this can only be accomplished by posing inquiries logically connected with established theories rather than coping with anomalies discovered within phenomena. Indeed, objectivity toward facts compels us to disguise facts; we are obliged to distance ourselves from the realm of data selected for examination in order to avoid any change of bias in scientific discovery. Objectivity, then, moves us away from empirical validation and into theory -- with the fatal flaw that we engage in futile evaluation of rival hypothesis at the expense of facts. The professional scholar is one who is disturbed and whose curiosity is aroused not by the incongruity of evidence, but by formulation hypotheses drawn from existing theory.[2]

With the above information in mind, one might be able to see how the problem of studying Black communication is even more methodologically confounded given the fact that existing communication theory does not take into consideration the primary assumptions of the African world view. Thus, the methodological problems facing those interested in studying Black communication can be summed up as follows:

1. Defining Black in a way that is consistent with an attitude of mind.

2. Convincing potential researchers that Blacks are not simply a neglected population that is either devoid of culture or is simply an incomplete form of the "dominant" culture.

3. Developing research methodologies that are based upon primary assumptions that are the same as the primary assumptions that support Black communication.

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[2] Ibid., p. 33.